

MIDDLE EAST

Flybys and Superspies

Israel celebrated the 23rd birthday of its potent air force last week with flowery words and impressive flybys. The words came from the air force commander, General Mordechai Hod: "We breathe the air of the summit of Mt. Hermon, our wings trace the tranquil waters of Mirfatz Shlomo [Sharm el Sheikh] and the reaches of Sinai, and our jets embrace the skies of Jerusalem, which has become a united whole." Then at Hod's order came phalanxes of Phantoms, Skyhawks, Mirages, Mysteres and Ouragans, of Sikorsky helicopters and Noratlas, Dakota and Strato cruiser transports, and even of gnatlike Cessnas.

The only disappointing aspect of the display for Israelis was that it did not include more of the swift, dangerous U.S.-built Phantoms, the backbone of the air force. Israel has so far received approximately 85 Phantoms and lost nine in sorties over Sinai or in accidents. Last year it requested another 40 or so to keep its military power on a par with that of the Arabs.

The Administration has postponed a decision, partly because it sees the Mid-

dle East power balance differently from the Israelis, partly because it considers the Phantoms a useful lever for moving Israel into a Suez Canal agreement. The Phantom decision is still, so to speak, up in the air, but Jerusalem hopes for some progress when Assistant Secretary of State Joseph J. Sisco makes a scheduled visit this week. "We don't expect Sisco to come flying over in a flotilla of Phantoms," says a government official. "But we do hope that he will come with words of encouragement."

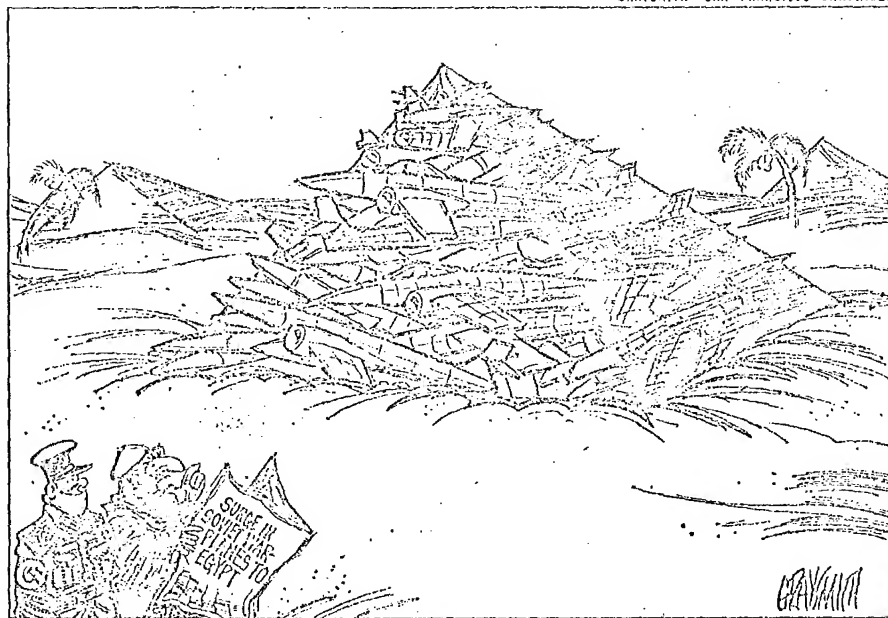
Arab Buildup. On the eve of Sisco's trip, pro-Israel politicians in the U.S. have been spreading alarmist reports about a significant buildup of Arab airpower. The Egyptians, according to Washington estimates, have received 100 MIGs since last September, in addition to 80 MI-8 troop-carrying helicopters. Syria has got 30 MIGs, five Sukhoi-7 fighter-bombers and 22 helicopters. All together, there are now nearly 600 So-

points discussed when Helms conferred with officials of Ha'Mossad, or "the Institution," the Israeli equivalent of the CIA:

- Soviet-flown MIG-23s, which can fly at 80,000 ft., an altitude that Phantoms cannot reach, are conducting intelligence missions out of Egyptian bases.
- Two electronics-crammed Russian "listening ships" have been stationed about 80 miles off the Israeli coast.
- Soviet radar installed on the ground in Egypt can monitor air routes over Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Jordan.
- Hundreds of Soviet intelligence experts are at work in Middle East evaluation centers in Cairo and Alexandria.
- Soviet agents are visiting Israel in increased numbers in the guise of tourists, journalists, European businessmen and even immigrating Jews.

The Russians are gathering information more openly than they once did; they are ready to risk more in order to

GRAYSMITH—SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE



"A fine job of camouflage, comrade..."

viet-built planes in the area, some flown by Soviet pilots.

The Administration argues that Soviet plane figures look more formidable than they are. U.S. officials point out that while the Arabs have about a 6-to-1 advantage over Israel in planes, the Israelis have the edge in qualified pilots and able ground crews. Egypt lost so many pilots in the war of attrition that after Russian resupply it had four times as many jets as men to fly them. The Israelis fret nonetheless about the growing number of aircraft in Arab countries, and there are signs that they will not discuss a Suez agreement until there is some redressing of the balance.

Soviet Activity. If the weapons buildup is worrisome to Israel, the U.S. has shown concern over a marked buildup of Soviet intelligence activities in the Middle East. In a report to Congress, the CIA Director Richard Helms recently visited Israel. Some

learn more. Helms and his hosts apparently came to no firm conclusions about the objectives of the current Soviet operation. But they did reach some decisions, including an Israeli agreement to provide facilities for U-2s and SR-71 U.S. spy planes.

It will be no surprise if Sisco, fresh from conferences with the National Security Council, makes less headway on the diplomatic front. His object is to probe for possible areas in which U.S.-sponsored discussions on reopening the Suez Canal can be continued.

In Cairo last week, State Department Middle East Specialists Donald C. Bergus and Michael Sterner received assurances from President Anwar Sadat that Egypt still wants the canal reopened—but on its own terms. Sisco is likely to hear much the same thing in Jerusalem. Helms' visit was not intended to suggest that the tanks are dead and that visits like Sisco's are merely cosmetics for a corpse.